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ABSTRACT

A college-level applied sociology course in which students use sociological theory or research methodology to solve social problems is described. Guidelines for determining appropriate projects are: (1) the student must feel there is a substantial need for the project; (2) the project must be approachable through recognized sociological techniques, and (3) the project must be feasible within the time frame of the course. Some projects students have conducted are described, e.g., they have built new social organizations and started a babysitting service as a shelter for potential child-abuse victims. In organizing and structuring the course, principles from classic sociological theories are used, and this strategy is shared with students. For example, sensitized to anomie by Emile Durkheim, the author took care when structuring this course to clearly draw norms. Students are expected to contribute much of the direction for their project. However, structure is provided through weekly group meetings, a private consulting session, and a student journal containing weekly progress reports. Research techniques used in the projects include experiments, survey research, field work, and documents analysis. One of the biggest challenges is helping the students deal with values. (RM)

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APPLYING SOCIOLOGY TO THE TEACHING OF APPLIED SOCIOLOGY

RICHARD CHEEVER WALLACE

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Paper presented at the Annual American Sociological Association Meeting (Detroit, MI, August 31-September 4, 1983).

I. The Aim of this Paper

Using Sociology

How do we help students learn to use sociology? The question is especially relevant to our present interest in applied sociology, yet it is deceptively simple. Most of us are trained and practiced in "doing" sociological research, or constructing sociological theory, rather than "applying" the sociological knowledge we create. As conventionally taught in the U.S., sociology offers a variety of insights, ideas, facts, and skills. Yet as sociologists, most of us have sought to use social behavior as a means of generating knowledge, rather than using this knowledge as a means of influencing social behavior. Recently this has begun to change, as increasing numbers of sociolgists and departments of sociology turn their attention to applying sociology. Perhaps our interest in applied sociology is an attempt to gain back dwindling student and government support for the conventional sociology of the past. Certainly, understanding how to apply sociology is a prerequisite to using it to help reduce our acute and chronic social problems. Given our faith in applying sociology, we might well practice what we preach, and apply sociology to our teaching of applied sociology.

In this paper I share some of my ideas and experiences in seeking to apply my sociological talents to teaching others to do the same. For me, the applied sociology course itself becomes a model of applied sociology.

One Approach to An Applied Sociology Course

A host of academic activities can legitimately wear the

label of applied sociology, including 1) work in social service agencies, 2) research in areas where there is an immediate "practical" application, and 3) projects which use sociological theory or research methodology to improve our social world. Our college offers three separate courses for these three areas. The course we have titled "Applied Sociology" deals in the third area, and it is in this course that students make the most explicit attempts at directly applying sociology.

This paper deals with the applied sociology course, some of the projects students have conducted, and the sorts of projects I hope students will one day choose. I disucuss how I have attempted to integrate well known sociological theories and research techniques into the design of the course. The applied sociology course is intended to challenge the student to evaluate their social world and assess their sociological tools. We believe the student can improve both their thinking and their world by applying each to the other. We intend the course for majors who have completed most of their course work, and we intend the experience to be be equal in effort, but superior in product, to a senior thesis. Each student takes responsibility for their own project. The course casts the student sociologist into the role of actor or leader, orchestrating change in an area which the student deems important.

What types of projects are approriate to this course? Here are the major guidelines. First the student must feel there is a substantial need for the project. Second, the project must be approachable through recognized sociological knowledge and techniques. Third, the project must be feasible within the time

frame of the course.

We want students to identify what they regard as the biggest social problem, and their single biggest opportunity. Then we hope to help them squeeze as much wisdom as possible from sociology to arrive at a significant accomplishment in sociology and social action. These are ideal objectives, and students' projects often fall nearer the modest rather than the grand end of the spectrum.

In the interest of seeing what actually happens in this type of course, let us review some of the projects students have conducted. Several students have set out to build new, or rehabilitate old, social organizations. For instance, Tom Cachey and Cathy Wilharm sought to revitalize and institutionalize the Sociology Club. These students faced the challenge of designing and promoting programs, securing funding, designing an organizational structure, attempting to integrate the club with a national honorary, and developing a leadership core which would assure the continuation of the club into the future after these two promoters departed. In a somewhat similar project Mark Wasylyshyn developed a new commercial enterprise within the college to market video taped debates to other colleges and universities. Mark too, faced the challenge of designing an organization on paper and setting out to make it a viable entity. Other students have chosen organization design projects as well. Laurie Timmons and Buff McCarthy attempted to start a baby sitting service as a shelter for children whose parents were on the verge of child abuse. Willis Miles developed a program of

athletic clinics which used the talents of college athletes to help youth in the community develop their athletic abilities and become more aware of, and favorably disposed toward, the college and higher education.

Many students have chosen projects which involve serving groups as opposed to starting them. Alison Maclaren sought to find effective ways to convey sociological ideas. She used her knowledge of photography and sociology to produce photographs with sociolcgical meanings. She developed a set of themes she sought to illustrate, and explored social settings with promise for this purpose. By the end of the course Alison had developed a portfolio of materials which compared favorably with the illustrations in sociological textbooks.

One semester, Michel DeJulian, Angelica Berry, and Andrea Adams encoded responses to 9,000 questionaires which were part of a survey conducted by an office of the college. Bob Johnscn, a young writer, satirically described our peculiar and sometimes perplexing social life for the college newspaper.

Mary Ann Miller helped a special education school track the progress and level of satisfaction of its "graduates" by designing, administering, and interpreting a survey.

I have many projects in mind which I hope students will one day adopt. I would also like to see students develop a community with the recent alumni of the college to develop better communication and cooperation between the students, faculty, and alumni. I would like to see the students build bridges to the town community. I would like to see students develop projects which help them learn about themselves and their future as they

help senior citizens. I would like to see a host of projects to foster loving relations within families, communities, organizations, and the world. Perhaps the most challenging projects of all, are ones in which the student develops the social resources to love their enemies.

II. Sociological Theory and Applied Sociology

We can approach the application of sociological theory to social projects from two directions. First we can ask ourselves, what theories we need, and then seek them. For example, those interested in organizing a new movement or organization might deliberately seek out theories dealing with these topics. A second approach is to survey the more general theories we have at hand, and ask how we might apply these to our specific situation. Both approaches can be productive, but because sociologists tend to construct very general abstract theories, when we apporach a very specific project such as effectively organizing an undergraduate applied sociology course, we may find ourselves using the second approach by default, since there is so little theory aimed precisely at our issue.

In organizing our applied sociology course I have conciously attempted to apply principles from some of the classic theories, and I think it is a good idea to explicitly share this strategy with students so that I can serve as a role model for their projects.

Drawing from the works of W. I Thomas, who observed that "he who defines a situation, controls it," I seek to define the situation to the maximum advantage of the participants. I define

the course as challenging, practical, exciting, and worthwhile. This begins with the course outline and opening session and continues through a formal presentation of results by the students to sociology faculty. The basic message is clear: The course is important to students and faculty.

I also employ Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the looking glass self. This means that I assume that if I view the students as responsible, capable, and successful, they are more likely to see themselves in this light. This in turn should lead to responsible, capable, and successful behavior.

Emile Durkheim has sensitized me to anomie. The applied sociology course is new and unusual in format. It lacks tradition. We need to be very careful in structuring the course so that the norms are clearly drawn and the students comply with the norms. Otherwise we risk the problems attendant with anomie. Since the student is expected to contribute much of the direction for their project, there is a delicate balance between providing enough structure to avoid having the student flounder, but not so much control that the student looses the sense that the project is his or hers. Among the things I have found which help are: regular "workshop" meetings with students as a group, and regular private "consulting" sessions with each student. We also have routine practice sessions within the group meetings asking, where can we apply this theory?, or how could we use that technique? Each student keeps a journal which is submitted and graded each week. It contains a progress report, and through the journal the student procedes through a series of assignments which help him

or her to identify their interests, talents, and social concens. Each student also eventually develops a step by step plan for their project complete with contingency paths in case the original plan proves problematic. All these procedures involve the student in a distinct but flexible social structure.

Based on Max Weber's concepts of authority and bureaucracy, I have further developed the social control and organizational aspects of the course. With each successive offering of the course I have found new ways to divide the labor of the course. The overall goal is simply to get students using and learning sociology, but this broad task divides into several specific ones including having the student assess their skills, assess their interests, scan the social environment for possible projects, investigate project possibilities, find resources, make plans, work the plans, and revise them. The student teacher relationship is one of authority, with the professor seeking to maximize influence through the exercise of traditional and rational-legal authority. Next time I offer the course I will require students to make written and public committments to their projects. This I see as an exercise of rational legal authority.

I have indicated how I have aplied classical sociological concepts, theory, and research techniques to this course. Of course many other existing sociological theories can be adapted to this setting and new theories can be constructed. One need not go far to find theories to apply to the teaching of applied sociology.

III. Sociological Research Techniques and Applied Sociology

Like our students, we have four major research techniques at our disposal: experiments, survey research, field work, and documents analysis. Some I have used more than others, although I believe all can be applied to teaching applied sociology. I use a survey instrument to assess the success of the course and to gather new ideas for the next offering of the course. I also rely heavily on the analysis of documents, specifically the weekly journal, which keeps me appraised of the student's activities. Informally, I sometimes play the role of the field worker, listening carefully, especially to casual comments students make. I have not conciously applied experimental techniques, though looking back, I have occasionally felt an unusual project was either a successful or unsuccessful "experiment". In this regard I have become wary of projects in which the student is both the subject and object of the project. I am therefore inclined to set aside project proposals in which the student seeks to change their own social nature.

IV. Values and Applied Sociology

One of the biggest opportunities and challenges in teaching applied sociology is helping the student to deal in the realm of values. No other sociology course I teach requires more of the student and the professor as moral actors. The student must choose what is worth doing and how to do it ethically. The professor, must guide the student in the decision, and then make as valid a value judgment of the project as possible.

My early journal assignments guide the student toward finding a project consistent with their deepest values. So far

students have tended to pick relatively humble, non-controversial projects as opposed to grand or zealous ones. Still, I try to guide them toward what they realize is important by asking them journal questions like, "What really needs changing in this college,...town,...or world?

My evaluation of the students progress begins at the begining and proceds to the end of the course. I request a detailed progress report weekly in the students journal, and I issue a letter grade for the quality of work performed during the week. I have experimented with delayed or less than weekly evalauation, and I believe that this frequent and regular grading is important. Even when the professor verbally states his expectations, there may be a tendency for some students to procrastinate. Early evaluation lets the student know what the professor values.

Even though this is a project course, I guard against an overly bureaucratic view of the world which sees values as ends to be met through actions. For me, the ultimate value is not an end to be achieved, thorough whatever means, and at any cost. I would not, for instance, allow a project in which a student used violence to overthrow even a corrupt or violent organization. To me, love, the core value is both means and end. I try to help students see loving rather than hateful relations as the general means and general ends of their applied sociology projects.

V. Conclusions

I have shared some of what I have learned, in seeking to selfconcioulsly apply sociology to the teacning of applied

sociology. Clearly, the field is full of opportunity to move beyond this point. I hope my observations are of some use to those seeking to help undergraduates become applied sociologists.

To summarize, I find it useful to use sociology in teaching others to use sociology. I have used various theories and research techniques, and I am sure there are many others waiting to be applied. The most significant insight I have had in the process, is that of the reflexive nature of thought and action. If the course runs well the student learns sociology through practice and learns practice from sociology. Similarly, projects seem to work best when their means and ends are in harmony with each other. When the course succeeds the student leaves knowing their sociology better and having improved their social world.